

# **The Future of Lebanon**

Testimony presented by

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, for this opportunity to discuss Lebanon. My focus will be on the aspect of this subject that I know best, namely the Syrian occupation of that country. I shall explain the reason for the occupation, its implications, and the dramatic impact of two recent developments (the Israeli force withdrawal and the death of Syria's President Hafiz al-Asad). I will conclude with an overview of past U.S. policy and some policy recommendations.

### **The Syrian Occupation**

With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Lebanon has the unhappy distinction of being the world's only remaining satellite state. Its government boasts the trappings of sovereignty—a flag, an independence day, a constitution, membership in the United Nations—but little or none of its substance. In fact, all the country's major decisions are made in Damascus, Syria.

The origins of this situation go back to the beginning of the century now ending. In 1920, when the French government carved modern Lebanon out of Syria, this met with considerable opposition in Syria, where Lebanon was seen as provinces of Syria. That opposition persisted through the next two generations. Only with the outbreak of Lebanon's civil war in 1975, however, did the Syrian authorities find an opportunity to act on their intention to get Lebanon back. Their takeover of the country occurred step by step, climaxing in 1990 with the domination of some 90 percent of the country.

Though achieved with far greater subtlety and skill, Hafiz al-Asad's takeover of Lebanon closely resembled Saddam Husayn's occupation of Kuwait. In both cases, the dictator of a powerful totalitarian state exploited an old irredentist claim to justify the subjugation of a small, free, and Western-oriented neighbor. The major difference is one of finesse: in contrast to Saddam's crude and brutal invasion, Asad prepared the way by sponsoring a range of Lebanese dissident groups, had himself invited in by bona fide Lebanese leaders, and then over a fifteen-year period gradually incorporated portions of the country.

Asad disposed of many levers of power in Lebanon. An estimated 40,000 Syrian troops and uncounted political and intelligence agents maintained a formidable presence throughout the country, plus hundreds of thousands of Syrians moved there.

Control of Lebanon brought Asad many benefits. It marked a significant step toward bringing all of "Greater Syria" under Damascus's direct control, one of his long-term aims. It permitted him to stamp out the press criticism and political intrigue that once came out of Beirut. Lebanon provided his officials

with an annual income from drug trafficking estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars, maybe more. It provided employment for as many as a million Syrian workers and offered a protected market for Syrian products. It gave Asad control of a second voice in Arab councils and the peace process. It presented a way for him to tangle with Israel without endangering his regime; the two sides have tacitly agreed to reserve total war for the Golan Heights and engage in lesser skirmishes in Lebanon. More ominously, control of Lebanon also provided a convenient venue for housing terrorist proxies by keeping them under Syrian control but outside of direct Syrian responsibility.

Curiously, by the Syrian government's own lights, its occupation of Lebanon is illegal. Damascus has on three occasions concurred with decisions made by other bodies that Syrian troops should leave Lebanon. It first agreed to withdraw the troops in October 1976 as part of the Riyadh-Cairo accords.<sup>1</sup> In September 1982, it signed the Fez Declaration that committed it to "start negotiations" with the Lebanese government about "an end to the mission of the Arab deterrent forces in Lebanon [i.e., the Syria troops]."<sup>2</sup> Finally, in October 1989, Asad accepted an agreement hammered out by the Lebanese parliament (the Ta'if Accord); Christians supported a revision of the Lebanese government structure and in return he said that Syrian troops, within two years of some conditions being met, would be redeployed from their positions in Beirut to the Bekaa Valley.<sup>3</sup> Those conditions were all fulfilled in September 1990; but September 1992 came and went without any change. Theodor Hanf, a leading German scholar of Lebanon, dubs this a "blatant violation" of the Ta'if Agreement.<sup>4</sup>

### **Implications for Lebanon**

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Specifically, Damascus agreed to "the withdrawal of armed elements to the places they occupied before April 13, 1975, and to remove all armed manifestations." For the text of the document in English, see Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, *The Search for Peace in the Middle East: Documents and Statements, 1967-79* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), pp. 336-37.

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For the text of the declaration in English, see John Norton Moore, ed., *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*, vol. 4, *The Difficult Search for Peace (1975-1988)*, part 2, pp. 1154-56.

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For the text of the accord in English, see Dilip Hiro, *Lebanon Fire and Embers: A History of the Lebanese Civil War* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), pp. 231-40.

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Theodor Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon: Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation*, trans. from German by John Richardson (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), p. 636.

Occupation has had many consequences for Lebanon. Until 1975, it was the most open of all the Arabic-speaking countries, boasting decentralized power, real democracy, rule of law, unimpeded movement, a Hong Kong-style free market, independent schools, and an unfettered press.

Under Syrian control, however, the central government in Beirut has gained in authority, rendering recent parliaments, according to Hanf, “the least representative in Lebanese history.”<sup>5</sup> Syrian operatives function almost entirely outside the rule of law (for example, they routinely make arrests without warrants) leading Human Rights Watch to conclude that “the record of violations in Syrian-controlled Lebanon has been worse than in Syria.”<sup>6</sup> Freedom of movement ended when Syrians decided who comes into the country and who goes out. Asad’s regime has sought to impose Syrian-style standards on the school curricula, including the requirement that Arabic and Islam be taught. It brought the free-wheeling Lebanese economy more in line with that of statist Syria and created organic links between the two countries (for example, in the electricity grid and in roads), sometimes with an eye to their permanent connection (why else was Lebanon forced to convert its power stations from petroleum to liquefied natural gas, which happens to be imported from Syria?). Cheap Syrian goods are dumped in Lebanon. As for the press, Human Rights Watch states that it “has been forced to toe a Syrian-drawn line, leave Syrian-controlled Lebanon, or cease functioning.”<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps most significant for the long-range future, the Asad regime has opened the doors for Syrians to move to Lebanon, seek work there, settle there, and sometimes bring other family members to join them there. With time, this emigration may profoundly alter Lebanon’s population by increasing the proportion of peasants and Muslims. Such changes have the additional virtue, from the Damascene point of view, of making the Christian population, and especially the Maronites who are the heart of independent Lebanon, feel less welcome in their own homeland. (Nasrallah Sfeir, the Maronite patriarch, has accused the Syrians of attempting precisely this.) Lebanese Christians already have a century’s legacy of emigration; continued Syrianization of their country makes them prone to leave their ancestral home in ever-increasing numbers.

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Ibid., p. 632.

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Human Rights Watch, *World Report 1991*, p. 604.

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Human Rights Watch, *World Report 1991*, p. 605.

Should they do so, Damascus will have cleared the major obstacle to its permanent colonization of Lebanon.

So subservient are Lebanese politicians to their suzerain in Damascus, they routinely visit the Syrian capital before making any major decision or even to resolve problems among themselves. On some occasions, the prime minister surrounded himself with most of his cabinet to travel the very 70 miles to Damascus.<sup>8</sup> Speaking candidly, former president Ilyas al-Hirawi once confessed his shame at this pattern of behavior: “We now disagree on the appointment of a doorman and go to Damascus to submit the problem to the brothers [there].”<sup>9</sup> Prime Minister Salim al-Huss sees no end date to the Syria’s occupation but states that it will last “as long as the government sees their presence necessary.”<sup>10</sup> As a former Lebanese diplomat puts it, “Everyone knows that Syria controls everything in Lebanon, totally.”<sup>11</sup> Or, as Uri Sagie, then head of Israeli military intelligence, put it, “Lebanon’s dependence on Syria is absolute.”<sup>12</sup>

Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of Lebanon’s population—and not just the Christians among them—rejects the Syrian occupation. Survey research among Lebanese Sunnis in 1989-90 showed that a mere 3 percent of them favored union with Syria.<sup>13</sup> Anecdotal evidence confirms this. As one Lebanese put it a few years ago, “Syria is at the top of the hate list in Lebanon today, much more so than Israel. Israel is perceived of only as a military

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For example, 11 of the 16 ministers joined Salim al-Huss in October 1999 as a sign of respect when he went to sign accords on farm produce and tourism with Hafiz al-Asad.

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*Ad-Diyar* (Beirut), 3 December 1994.

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United Press International, 6 September 1999.

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*Los Angeles Times*, 15 February 1997.

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*Davar*, 5 September 1994.

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Hilal Khashan, "The Lebanese State: Lebanese Unity and the Sunni Muslim Position," *International Sociology* 7 (1992): 93. In contrast, 86 percent favored a unitary state, 10 percent a federal state, and 1 percent chose partition of the country. The survey had 500 respondents.

threat while Syria threatens Lebanon's very existence."<sup>14</sup>

Lebanese opinion might overwhelmingly reject the occupation but it could do or say little; discussion of this issue within the country is taboo, so "most outright opposition is confined to Lebanese abroad, unsigned Internet postings and quiet conversations."<sup>15</sup> Here is an Associated Press report from mid-1997:

In private, Lebanese complain about Syria's hold on their country and their lack of real independence. ... But few are publicly demanding that Syria immediately pull out its forces. Part of it is fear of offending their stronger neighbor, known as "sisterly Syria" in the Arabic tradition. "Big brotherly" Syria would be more accurate.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, Lebanese opinion would spontaneously erupt on occasion. In the summer of 1997, the Syrian and Lebanese soccer all-star teams played a semi-final game in Lebanon. In the course of the game, fans got into fights after the Syrians resident in Lebanon chanted, "In spirit and blood we will redeem you Hafiz [al-Asad]." Lebanese fans responded by calling on the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. As tensions rose, the two sides began fighting until dispersed by the worried authorities.<sup>17</sup> Students were arrested in Beirut in March 1999 for distributing leaflets that called for an end to the Syrian occupation. Leaders sometimes spoke their mind: "All this talk about Syria's presence in Lebanon being a safeguard against Israeli aggression is a lot of trash," asserted Dory Chamoun, leader of a small Maronite party. "We don't need Syria here to help us."<sup>18</sup>

Such outspokenness notwithstanding, year after year the Syrian occupation of Lebanon persisted, almost without change. The situation was about as

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<sup>14</sup>

*Ha'aretz*, 19 June 1995.

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*Baltimore Sun*, 10 February 2000.

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Associated Press, 29 July 1997.

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*Al-Mashhad As-Siyasi*, 9 August 1997.

<sup>18</sup>

Inter Press Service, 8 October 1998.

completely static as one can find in the contemporary world.

### **Recent Developments**

Suddenly, in recent weeks, two major changes have taken place. Together, these challenge the occupation as nothing has at least since 1984.

First, the abrupt Israeli pullback from south Lebanon changed the political landscape. The Syrians have since 1978 deflected criticism of their own occupation by pointing to the need to counter the Israeli security belt in the south. No matter how flimsy this justification, it did serve them well. Lebanese politicians, for example, endlessly repeated the mantra that Syrian troops must stay so long as Israel's occupation continued. When that later occupation ended in the early morning of 24 May 2000, so did the catch-all rationale for the Syrian armed presence. United Nations Resolution 520, which calls for the "withdrawal of all non-Lebanese forces from Lebanon," these days refers only to Syrian forces.

Second, Asad's declining health was apparent for months and ended with his death on June 10. His gradual fade from the scene heartened those in Lebanon wanting to escape Syrian control. They saw his passing as the start of a struggle for power in Damascus that would reduce Syrian force projection, thereby giving the Lebanese more room to maneuver. They sensed that, absent his sure and ruthless hand, that control would likely be much reduced, and possibly even ended. Asad's death gave heart to all those in Lebanon who wish to see their country out from under the Damascene thumb.

These two changes encouraged Lebanese patriots to speak out and demonstrate against the Syrian occupation. The opening salvo was on 23 March 2000, when Jibran Tueni, chairman of the board and managing director of *An-Nahar* newspaper, wrote "An Open Letter to Dr. Bashshar Asad" in which he frankly informed the heir-apparent in Syria that "many Lebanese are neither at ease with the Syrian policy in Lebanon, nor the Syrian 'presence' in Lebanon" and then boldly declared, "We are not a Syrian province." This unheard-of candor was quickly followed by a series of acts of resistance. In April, unknown assailants three times in three weeks threw sticks of dynamite at a compound housing 1,500 Syrian workers in southern Lebanon, an attack later claimed by a group calling itself Citizens for a Free and Independent Lebanon.

In mid-April, small groups of protesters associated with former prime minister Michel Aoun boldly marched in front of the Justice Ministry one day and in front of the national museum and university the next, chanting anti-Syrian slogans such as "Syria get out of here."<sup>19</sup> On the third day, about one thousand demonstrators gathered at the Lebanese University and shouted out "The Israeli

army out, the Syrian army out and Lebanon first.”<sup>20</sup> Labor unions then followed with more demonstrations. Within ten days of these events, Syrian troops became less visible, redeploying from a dozen high-profile checkpoints – though of course government spokesmen denied any connection to the demonstrations.<sup>21</sup> This appears to be the first-ever retreat by Syrian forces within Lebanon.

Various religious figures spoke their minds. The Maronite Patriarch, Cardinal Nasrallah Butros Sfeir, stated that if Lebanon “wants to control its future ... and for the Lebanese to regain their liberty, the Syrian troops must leave.”<sup>22</sup> More surprisingly, Archbishop Elias Audi of the usually docile Eastern Greek Orthodox Church spoke up on behalf of the student protestors to his congregation in a Palm Sunday sermon. Human rights groups in Lebanon got on the case. Even the Muhammad Mahdi Shams ad-Din, chairman of Lebanon's Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council, complained publicly that Lebanon has “no judicial branch in the full meaning of the word, enjoying full independence, immune from all other branches, and exercising autonomy.”<sup>23</sup>

Again pushing the outer limits of the possible, just two days before Hafiz al-Asad's death, Jibran Tueni wrote a scathing and sarcastic attack in his newspaper repudiating the logic the Syrian foreign minister used “to defend the presence of Syrian forces in Lebanon.”<sup>24</sup>

Looking forward, I predict a hot summer in Lebanon; beyond that, I can anticipate the day when Lebanon will free itself of the Syrian yoke and again be a sovereign country.

## **U.S. Responses**

Thanks to the Syrian dictator's cleverness, nearly the entire world acquiesced in his seizure of Lebanon—including our own Executive Branch. The

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Agence France-Presse, 19 April 2000.

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For the fullest account in English of these demonstrations, see Gary C. Gambill, “Special Report: Lebanon's Intifada,” *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, April 2000, at <http://www.meib.org>, from which some of the following information derives.

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*La Croix*, 6 June 2000.

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Speech to the Committee for Good Governance in Lebanon (CGGL), 12 May 2000.

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*An-Nahar*, 8 June 2000.



White House and State Department during the Clinton years have never specifically called for Syria to withdraw, contenting themselves with a vague appeal on “all foreign forces” to leave the country.

Though perfectly aware of it (as implied by the oft-repeated statement that the U.S. government “remains dedicated to the goal of a fully sovereign and independent Lebanon, free of all foreign forces and able once more to take its rightful place among the nations of the world”), they prefer not to confront it.<sup>25</sup> Their reasoning is simple: seeing Lebanon almost exclusively in the context of Arab-Israeli negotiations, where it represents just an irritant, they do their best to pay it no attention. As a State Department official frankly explained to me some years ago, “we constantly urge complete implementation of the Ta’if Accord [i.e., a withdrawal of Syrian troops] but it’s not a bilateral priority. We’ve not condemned this [non-implementation] very loudly because it needs to be resolved in the context of a comprehensive peace settlement.”<sup>26</sup>

Worse, at times the Clinton Administration has endorsed the Syrian occupation: a report in December 1999 indicated that it “appealed to prominent Lebanese politicians and opinion-makers to allow Syrian troops to remain in Lebanon” after Israel pulls its troops out from the south.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, a Beirut daily reported that “U.S. ambassador David Satterfield diplomatically ‘warned’ these personalities not to count on an Israeli request for a Syrian withdrawal.”<sup>28</sup>

The turmoil of recent weeks finds the Clinton Administration responding meekly. After the Israeli troop withdrawal, Martin Indyk, our ambassador to Israel, blandly called the Israeli troop withdrawal “a golden opportunity for the

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One example of this relates to a June 25, 1997, hearing of the House Committee on International Relations on the topic of “U.S. Policy toward Lebanon.” The committee had invited Michel Aoun, a particular nemesis of the Syrian authorities, to testify; as late as the day of the hearing itself, he was expected to appear. The State Department’s refusal to provide him with a visa, however, preventing him from entering the country. This unusual step – perhaps the only time the Executive branch prevented a foreign witness from testifying before Congress – was apparently intended to placate sensibilities in Damascus.

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Telephone interview with Elizabeth Hopkins, desk officer for Syria, 10 November 1994.

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Middle East Newsline, 26 December 1999.

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*Al-Mustaqbal*, 22 December 1999. The Israelis, it bears note, apparently have not once raised the subject of ending the Syrian occupation of Lebanon in the course of their nearly decade-long negotiations with Damascus.

government of Lebanon to extend its authority down here to the border.”<sup>29</sup> During a meeting in Cairo with Syria’s foreign minister, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright did not raise the issue of Syria’s occupation of Lebanon; in public, she praised it: “Syria has played a constructive role as far as Lebanon is concerned. We hope that they will continue to do so.” The best she could do was avoid mentioning the Syrian troops by name and instead resort to the tired old formulation that “all foreign forces should depart.”<sup>30</sup>

Syria’s authorities, not surprisingly, responded to this weak advisory by insisting on their right to stay put. Faruq ash-Shar`a, the Syrian foreign minister, explained: “with all due respect, it is not in the interest of Ms. Albright to raise this issue. We are in Lebanon at the request of the Lebanese government and people and not with the blessing of the United States.”<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to the administration’s record of collusion with the Syrian occupation, even encouragement of it, Congress has forthrightly and repeatedly condemned it: you voted unanimously in July 1993 to consider “the Government of Syria in violation of the Taif agreement.”<sup>32</sup> In June 1995, a second, similar resolution (Sec. 2712) passed the House. In June 1997, Rep. Eliot Engel’s Amendment to H.R. 1986 concerning “Sanctions against Syria,”<sup>33</sup> passed (by a vote of 410 to 15).

It is also encouraging to see that of late other voices have spoken up on behalf of the repressed Lebanese. Human rights groups have condemned the Syrian presence, as have major media. For example, the *Boston Globe* noted in an editorial that “the freedom of Lebanon will require not only Israel’s retreat from southern Lebanon but also a subsequent withdrawal of the 40,000 troops of

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*Ha’aretz*, 31 May 2000.

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Reuters and Associated Press, 7 June 2000.

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Lebanon Foundation for Peace, 7 June 2000.

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U.S. Congress Concurrent Resolution 28, 1 July 1993.

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Unless the government of Syria eliminates "its dangerous and destabilizing policies," the resolution urges the president to apply to Syria the same sanctions as those already in force against Iran and Libya since 1996.

Syria's occupation force."<sup>34</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* concurred: "One foreign army of occupation has left Lebanon. Now it's time for the second to do the same."<sup>35</sup> My own organization, the Middle East Forum, has just published a study group report calling for an end to the Syrian occupation;<sup>36</sup> I am pleased to report that Chairman Helms is a signatory of that report.

### **Policy Choices**

The U.S. government faces a fundamental choice vis-à-vis Lebanon: accept or contest Syrian domination there. Operationally, this translates into either working with or ignoring the puppet government of Lebanon.

*Work with the government:* Recognize Emile Lahud as a real president and Salim al-Huss as a real prime minister, accept the 1998 municipal elections as legitimate, and acquiesce to rules established by the Syrian regime. Such a policy has the advantage of winning favor in Damascus and just possibly encouraging it to sign a peace treaty with Israel. But it disheartens natural allies of the United States in Lebanon and abroad; and it signals the world that while a blatant invasion such as Saddam's into Kuwait is not acceptable, a subtle one such as Asad's into Lebanon is tolerable.

*Ignore the government:* The alternative is to denounce the Syrian occupation and ignore the governmental pseudo-structure in Beirut. This has the advantage of sticking with our friends and our principles; and of having bet on the winning side when the Lebanese do regain control of their country. It raises the danger of the U.S. government throwing its weight behind a force that today is on the losing side.

To my mind, there is really no choice: our government must stand in solidarity with the oppressed and against the oppressors. Just as we supported Estonians and Czechs through their decades of Soviet domination, even when the prospect of their independence seemed impossibly remote, so we must stand by the Lebanese people in their hour of need. Nor is this only a matter of principle: Baltic leaders all agree on the importance of the U.S. government refusing to accept the Soviet occupation of their countries. Lebanese patriots one day will similarly thank us for standing with their people even as they faced the seemingly

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8 March 2000.

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1 June 2000.

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Daniel Pipes and Ziad Abdelnour, co-chairs, *Ending Syria's Occupation of Lebanon: The U.S. Role* (Philadelphia: Middle East Forum, 2000).

invincible might of the Syrian sword.

There is also a practical reason for taking this step: as Gary Gambill (of the *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*) notes, American support is vital if the Lebanese are to challenge their Syrian overlords. “Whenever it appears that U.S. appeasement of Syria is waning, Lebanese civil society rises to the occasion to challenge Syrian hegemony. On the other hand, when the U.S. shows lack of resolve vis-à-vis Syria, the Lebanese refrain from open expressions of dissent.”<sup>37</sup> We are not just bystanders but, willy-nilly, we are actors in an important drama: public disapproval of the Syrian occupation will inspire Lebanese impatience and thereby help end it.

Accordingly, I urge you to do all within your power to condemn and repulse the Syrian occupiers. Toward this end, Congress can take several steps.

First, you can use your bully pulpit by sending a direct message to the tyrants in Damascus. Prior congressional resolutions, I can assure you, were much noted in Damascus. My favorite would be a six-word statement: All Syrian forces must leave Lebanon.

Second, you can pressure the Executive branch to show some spine. In 1994, for example, Congress had a critical role in assuring that functionaries did not take Syria off the terrorism and narcotics lists.

Third, Congress can close the “national interest” loopholes that permit the Executive branch to waive regulations, and which it seems to do disproportionately for Damascus. For example, you can extend to Syria the sanctions in the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (which prohibits any investment of over \$20 million a year in the petrochemicals sectors).

Fourth, you can take initiatives such as funding a Radio Free Lebanon.

Finally, so long as the Syrian occupation continues, turn away appeals for money for Lebanon that would go to the Syrian-controlled government (this includes the army) and appropriate funds only to credible private organizations and institutions.